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McInnes, D.

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Manchester

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How best to carry on 



Distributive Co-operation
in Agricultural Districts.


By MR. D. McINNES.


PUBLISHED BY THE CO-OPERATIVE UNION LIMITED, LONG MILLGATE,
MANCHESTER.

1903.

How best to carry on Distributive Co-operation in Agricultural Districts.

THIS question is one surrounded with difficulties caused by differences in the habits, customs, and modes of living of the agricultural population in different counties. Even in the Midland Section of the Co-operative Union, with which I am best acquainted, there are such great differences between one part and another that, here in the south, I feel constrained to submit with diffidence and to advocate with reservation methods which have succeeded well only on the eastern side of our Section, but have not yet been adopted in other parts of it. I would add, also, that these methods of extending co-operative trading, although they may possibly be applicable anywhere, can only be applied if a desire to apply them exists or can be created among town co-operators, and a desire to adopt them is evinced by the surrounding agricultural population. From the Southern Section having chosen this subject for discussion, I conclude that many present are disposed to extend a helping hand to the agricultural class. And this is as it should be. If co-operation has lightened any of the burdens of our lives, if it has widened our views and made us fight life's battle with a stouter heart and a higher purpose and aspiration, it is clearly our duty to extend to others that which we have found so helpful. By doing so, moreover, we shall gain strength ourselves as we go forward, for so long as we have within us the missionary spirit impelling us onward, so long will the power and the capacity to succeed exist among us also. The progress of the co-operative movement is the most striking evidence of this, for it has grown to its present dimensions by the self-sacrificing labours of thousands of humble men who

are now numbered among the nameless dead. Neither in its inception, nor since, has it owed so much to the precepts of philosophers or the deductions of economists as some would have us believe. The founders of the movement, everywhere, have derived their inspiration from the wants of the labouring masses by whom they were surrounded; their followers, using, improving, developing the organisations fashioned by their predecessors, took their inspiration from the same source; therefore they achieved their purpose. And it is on these lines alone that we can continue to grow, providing for new wants from time to time, stage by stage, as those wants become articulate. By every business meeting we hold where reason, tolerance, and judgment take the place of turbulence and coarse invective, we exhibit our increasing capacity to manage our own affairs. And, as these grow in financial magnitude they increase also, though more slowly, in moral potentiality. To some among us the latter may seem to grow too slowly, but we must take heart and remember that the present standard of civilisation has been reached only by gradual changes from one set of conditions to another; changes, however, which have always been steadily onward and upward. Our conferences are means of educating working-class co-operators in business capacity and in creating the moral strength that produces united public action for public purposes. I expect, therefore, to hear the subject of this paper discussed in an earnest discriminating spirit, and with coolness and judgment.

Before submitting briefly the history and results of two distinct co-operative propagandist efforts in the eastern counties, I want to emphasise the fact that co-operation relies for its existence solely upon its own merits to a greater degree in an agricultural district than anywhere else; agricultural workers are not a class to sacrifice anything for the sake of sentiment. The small farmer is either too supine, too suspicious, or too independent to co-operate to any great extent on his own initiative. The

full extent of his co-operation is to belong to a cow or pig club, each member of which never misses the yearly meeting when the funds remaining, if any, are disbursed on an inn-dinner or supper, with drinks and cigars, and the possibility of half-a-crown for each member, in money, besides. As far as co-operation concerns their industry or calling, small farmers are quite content to let it shape itself, or to allow others more speculative or self-sacrificing to shape it for them, on condition, be it understood, that no loss is suffered by themselves in the process. They have less disposition than any class to work for the common welfare while working for their own. Turning from them to the agricultural labourers we have to deal with a class from which the young and buoyant life constantly flows away to the colonies or into town industries. In introducing co-operation among them one has to contend not only with the sluggishness of ignorance and the apathy of despair, but with the suspicion of being actuated by a desire to over-reach them in order to obtain some object that does not appear on the surface. Among small farmers, as well as among labourers, these defects are visible and these failings exist, and both classes are individualist to their very marrow. The foregoing, in my opinion, partly explains why the latter of the two kinds of propaganda which I shall treat upon has succeeded while the former failed, shattering for a long period the associative ideals of the agricultural labouring and small farming class among whom I have worked. Let me briefly review the methods of procedure of the first propagandists: The agricultural labourers' league movement of 37 years ago was, in the eastern counties, a curious compound of Trade Unionism and co-operation distributive and productive. The labourers were led by the promoters to believe that the establishment of a store must follow the opening of a branch of the league, and that the outgrowth from both combined would speedily be co-operative farms all over the agricultural counties. Although no such gourd-like growth was possible, perfervid pioneers went from village

to village preaching it as gospel, establishing branches, opening stores, renting or buying land. Some of the stores were registered; some, while doing a large business, never got as far as that. In one of the latter, known to the writer, the savings of a life-time of hard toil were invested by a number of poor, thrifty men. Dividends were declared but no accounts were kept. The treasurer, a league official, took in contributions to shares and paid out withdrawals from his trousers pocket wherever he might be when a member applied to him. This patriarchal procedure was varied by another of the officials, an office-bearer also of the league, taking an occasional trip to Canada in charge of a party of emigrating labourers and pocketing a commission on them from interested parties on the other side. One of these stores while drifting steadily to ruin, from similar lack of management, established branches in four distant villages, placing each in charge of incompetent farm labourers, collectors for the league. Of the household management of some of these it was said that the bread was eaten "buttered on both sides, and ham and eggs were always frying on the fire." Confidence began to be shaken and ruin speedily followed. The stores failed; the members lost every half-penny of their capital; the branches of the league were closed, and its agents and collectors were discredited. The predicted labour millenium proved but a mirage in an industrial desert, and while a whole countryside was strewn with the wrecks of co-operative societies the bits of land fell either into the hands of the most astute of the collectors or were disposed of to the highest bidders.

Knowledge of these consequences of misplaced confidence in misguided enthusiasts, while it chilled the desire to establish small societies in purely agricultural districts, undoubtedly paved the way for the introduction of co-operative trading in another form and by other hands.

The Lincoln Society was the first to take up practical propaganda work among the agricultural class, and its lead, after the lapse of several years, has been followed by

the Peterborough and Grimsby Societies; but it should be stated that the total proportion of purely agricultural workers is much greater among the Lincoln Branches than in those of the other two societies where railwaymen, in some of the branches predominate, and in others form a considerable minority.

The establishment by the Lincoln Society of branches in agricultural villages was begun at Welbourn in 1878, after meetings had been held at the request of the labouring and cottager class in two centres of the district comprising three villages. The society now has ten of these branches. The initiatory course invariably taken to establish them is as follows:—

When a desire for information about co-operation is manifested in any country place, and a communication is made to the society, a public meeting is held and members are enrolled, provided a sufficient number will join to warrant a van delivery of goods being started. Little or no capital is forthcoming, but as trade increases and capital accumulates from dividends a branch store is opened, and from it, as a centre, larger van rounds are taken until another branch is established, and from it again a fresh district is worked. At any of these branches the members, if they desire it, are encouraged to elect from themselves a supervising committee. Those of the local committeemen at one branch who show zeal, aptitude, and willingness are taken to address meetings and to bring members in at the establishment of the next, and so on. No outside aid has ever been called in to assist in propaganda work, and no one who has been engaged in it has ever asked for or received any remuneration for his services. Knowledge of this by those among whom the work has been carried on has undoubtedly done much to promote its success. Business meetings are held quarterly at branches where they are applied for, and, considering the sparse population, are very fairly attended, 15 being required to form a quorum. The same agenda of business is gone through as at the quarterly meetings

in Lincoln, and votes given are as valid under the society's rules as if given at the central meeting.

The results of this co-operative propaganda that can be shown in figures, are ten branches with a total membership of 3,141, who hold capital amounting to £21,314. They withdrew from the society in 1902 the sum of £7,763, and deposited in its funds, £1,342, and this is a fair reflex of what goes on year after year. Using the society thus as a bank is looked upon by the agricultural class as being one of the greatest advantages arising out of co-operation, especially since the cultivation of allotments and the consequent extension of pig-keeping has converted the agricultural labourer into a small producer on his own account. Goods are exchanged by the society for butter, eggs, fruit, and vegetables, at current market rates, to the value of £7,770 yearly.

Stated briefly, the agricultural class in one county, simply through the action of one society, have obtained by co-operative trading: (1) possession of £21,314 of capital; (2) a market at their own doors for a portion of their own produce; (3) a bank which is continually receiving, in addition to deposits of small savings, dividends on purchases; (4) a source whence money can be borrowed on mortgage at easy terms of repayment; and (5) lastly, constant contact and interchange of ideas with town workmen.

These results are very satisfactory, but notwithstanding what has been morally and materially achieved, the conclusions arrived at by the society after an experience extending over 24 years are that the agricultural class will risk nothing and sacrifice nothing. In districts purely agricultural we have, therefore, to evolve belief in the co-operative precept that it is our duty to work for the welfare of others as well as for our own. Were those among the agricultural class in the districts I have referred to not so sordid and so prone to want returns without risk to themselves, but to crave for them at the risk or expense of others, no matter whom, their material

position might be greatly bettered, their lives rendered brighter and their whole status as a class advanced immeasurably. I do not submit these conclusions as deterrents, but rather as salient incentives to effort. As a propagandist body the Co-operative Union must not slacken in any of its work, and if this conference which it has promoted should result in some actual mission work being undertaken the purpose of its promoters will be so far met. Realising as we do that the co-operative movement, carrying with it the spirit of reform from within, and ardour for promoting reform from without, is one of the greatest forces of the times, our duty is to continue our work with courage and self-devotion, even in the face of the adverse criticism or the stolid sordid selfishness of the most ignorant and unresponsive among those whom we seek to benefit.



LINCOLN CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LIMITED.

Country Branch Statistics.

Name of Place.	Distance from Lincoln.	Date established.	Present Membership.	Sales for Year 1902.	Net Profit for 1902.	Capital held by Local Members.	Present Value of Lands, Buildings, etc.	Amount advanced on Mortgage to Members.	Amount repaid to end of 1902.
	Miles.			£	£	£	£	£	£
Welbourn	13	1878	480	11456	938	3775	1510	1501	335
Metheringham ..	10	1881	350	8493	598	2745	959	230	48
Saxilby	6	1883	305	5312	313	1802	548	205	265
Bardney	9	1886	281	5399	285	1675	1268	...	...
Horncastle	23	1887	420	8482	610	3387	2368	769	84
Sleaford	18	1887	571	12165	1048	4503	2666	63	60
Market Rasen ..	15	1892	343	5301	461	1230	2926	780	333
Bassingham ...	6	1892	172	3800	176	881	1038	...	...
Reepham	4	1893	182	4130	198	1002	2359	75	63
Hackthorn	7	1900	37	1137	60	314	Rented premise s.	...	...
...	...	...	3141	65675	4691	21314	15672	3682	1188

PETERBOROUGH SOCIETY.

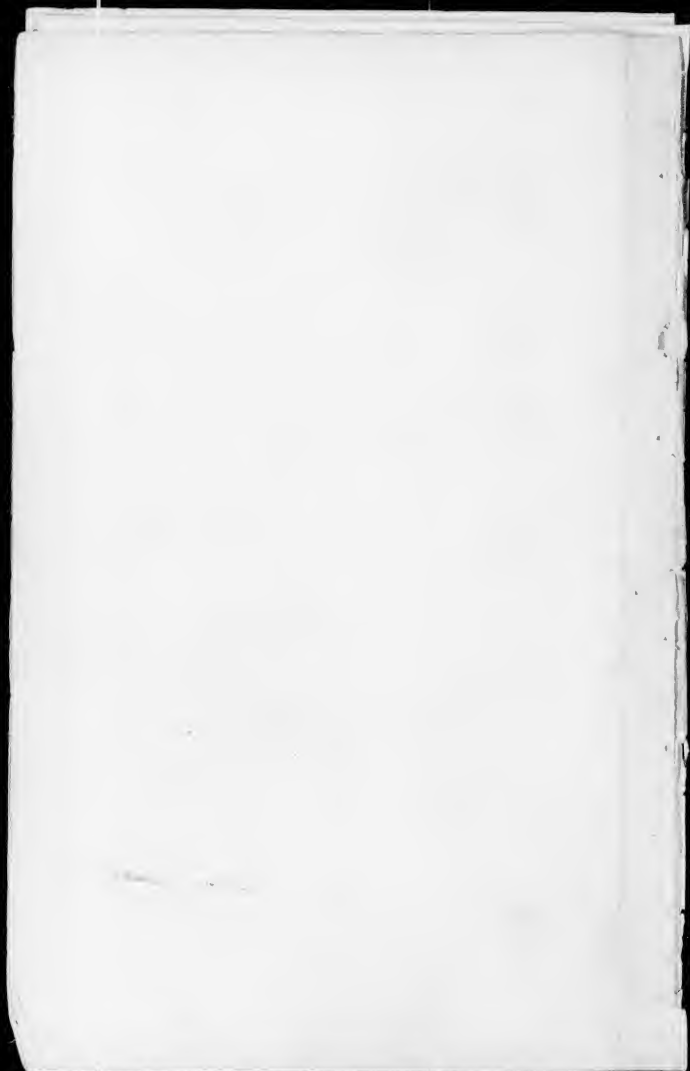
Country Branch Statistics.

Name of Place.	Distance from Peterborough.	Date established.	Present Membership.	Sales for Year 1902.	Net Profit for 1902.	Capital held by Local Members.	Present Value of Lands, Buildings, etc.	Amount advanced on Mortgage to Members.	Amount repaid to end of 1902.
	Miles.			£	£	£	£	£	£
March	14	1886	880	20595	2709	8234	5200	...	...
Whittlesea	7	1897	365	7344	649	2807	1100	...	...
Stamford	12	1900	420	6186	715	1654	Rented premise s.	...	...
...	...	...	1665	34125	4973	12695	6300	...	...

GRIMSBY SOCIETY.

Country Branch Statistics.

Name of Place.	Distance from Grimsby.	Date established.	Present Membership.	Sales for Year 1902.	Net Profit for 1902.	Capital held by Local Members.	Present Value of Lands, Buildings, etc.	Amount advanced on Mortgage to Members.	Amount repaid to end of 1902.
	Miles.			£	£	£	£	£	£
Barnetby	16	1901	148	3074	107	793	620
New Holland...	21	1901	85	1410	83	292	Rented premise s.
...	233	4484	280	1085	620



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